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# Reflections on Elections in South Africa

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## REFLECTIONS ON ELECTIONS IN SOUTH AFRICA

1. The elections were as much about stability as about accuracy or that ubiquitous designation, "free and fair". The logistical problems of ballots, ink, ultraviolet lamps, etc., were enormous. The late entry of INKATHA into the process created incredible problems: 500 new voting stations, training election personnel, printing the 80 million new ballots, providing identity documents for many, many people, ensuring security in an area convulsed with violence - all within a week. Someone asked if the IEC would be ready; the answer was "No", but they will go ahead anyway.

In the midst of these administrative and security nightmares, the election was held. And there was fraud in many places. But these were clearly not going to derail the process: it **would be free and fair**, as long as the ANC received 60 some percent of the vote, the NP 20 some percent, INKATHA performed well enough to stay in the game. Mandela's speeches merely confirmed this concern that guided the ANC, the NP, and the IEC, in particular.

2. The people wanted peace, another term for stability. All over the country signs said **Peace in our land**: T-shirts, car and taxi stickers, stores, etc., all announced loudly and clearly that the people were tired of the violence and wanted peace. And they would assert this right through the vote.

April 26, the Special Elections day, was peaceful. Many people, including the police, were worried about what would happen the next day when the youth arrived, with their toyi-toying. Would this set the stage for conflict and violence?

April 27 and 28 came, and the youth voted. There were many other problems but the militant youth were not a problem. Everyone wanted, and was determined, to vote. These sentiments clearly outweighed any other. The reactionary violence of the extreme white right wing, with its bombings in crowded residential areas, was seen both as inhuman and counter productive.

3. The guest parties that attended the inauguration told a story in themselves. The virtual entire political spectrum was there: from Libya's Gaddafi to Prince Philip, from Yasser Arafat and Fidel Castro to Al Gore and Hillary Clinton, from Meiring (SADF) to his former enemy and now Namibian head of state, Sam Nujoma.

This begs the question: can and will South Africa be the meeting ground for enemies to come to resolve their differences? With a leader of Mandela's stature, parties could utilize South Africa as a place to explore negotiated, non-violent settlements to war and conflict.



According to Allistar Sparks (*The New Yorker*, April 11, 1994), just before a secret July 5, 1989 meeting between P. W. Botha and Nelson Mandela, Niel Barnard (of National Intelligence) got down on his knees to tie the prisoner Mandela's shoelaces, before going in to see the Prime Minister. Could South Africa help bring other oppressors to their knees before their oppressed, to negotiate new social and political relationships, a new humanity?

4. A troubling aspect of the new South Africa is the weakened state of the church, at least its ecumenical side. While we were in Johannesburg for our week of training, and the few days after the election, few of us had reason to go down to Khotso House other than to visit the EMPISA offices (in the same building). The SACC was no longer a required stopping place for information, for consultation, for contacts. After the 1970's and 1980's, this was indeed an eerie, almost twilight sort of experience.

In King Williams Town, a few days after the election, Border Council of Churches personnel were encouraged to hand in their CV's, if they wanted government jobs. Many leading church people will take, and have already taken, jobs with the new government.

What will the role of the SACC be in the new South Africa? Who will be the new leaders to head it? Frank Chikane has made a commitment only until the end of the year. How will the churches continue their struggle for the poor, even as the ANC fights its own internal battles between its elitists and genuine populists.

5. In light of this, how will we "international" Christians develop a new solidarity with the people of South Africa? With apartheid officially gone from the political scene, and the South African ecumenical church weakened as many of its best leave for government work, who will be the voices for those who are still struggling to survive, to attain a decent job, adequate housing and health care, an education that prepares people for the end of this century? Will "international" Christians (NGO's and others) seek out their own contacts, work in isolation, as they choose? Will South African justice-oriented churches and other NGO's be pushed to compete with each other for shrinking international assistance? Will the ecumenical connection be neglected in favor of narrower, less justice-and-peace oriented relationships?

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